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## Feminine Empowerment in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*

Sharon D. Downey

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This analysis of Disney's fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast* argues that the film develops two contrasting narratives—female and male—through a blending of discursive and nondiscursive elements. As a result, the film creates a female spectatorship position which, in turn, gives rise to a dialectical perspective on power that resolves the gendered tension between these two narratives and opens the film to multiple interpretations, including a potentially empowering one for female viewers.

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The fairy tale's popularity in children's literature is unsurpassed. Such entertaining and enlightening stories activate children's curiosity and creativity, while their moral lessons provide mechanisms for coping with the complexities of life. Bettelheim (1976) argues that "more can be learned from [fairy tales] about the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments . . . than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension" (p. 5). In addition, their joint universalizing and culture-specific themes contribute to the process of "civilizing" (Zipes, 1983, p. 17) society's young because fairy tales encourage conformity to culturally-sanctioned roles (Sayers, 1973). The "truths" validated through folktales, however, often reinforce disparaging images of females.

Historically, fairy tales have not been kind to women. "In every really famous tale," writes Waelti-Walters (1982), "the heroine is systematically deprived of affection, stimulation, pleasurable activity, instruction, and even companionship. She is a totally powerless prisoner. . . . The reading of fairy tales is one of the first steps in the maintenance of a misogynous, sex-role stereotyped patriarchy" (p. 1). Indeed, Bottigheimer (1986) notes that, with little variation, fairy tales depict the feminine as a "paradigm of powerlessness" (p. 130).

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The images culled from fairy tales' oral and written traditions persist in their contemporary mass-mediated manifestations, including Disney animated film features. As a master chronicler of the genre in the twentieth century, Walt Disney has revived numerous classical tales on film—i.e., *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, *Pinnocchio*—and has earned condemnation for their stereotypical, sexually provocative, and denigrating portraits of females. For example, Lieberman (1977, p. 333) criticizes Disney's "beauty contest" motif as harmful for viewers; and Stone (1975) indicts Disney heroines for their passivity, contending that they are "barely alive" creatures whose "freedom . . . always end[s] at midnight" (pp. 44, 50). In *Peter Pan*, Crafton (1989) finds an allegory centered in Wendy's sexual awakening and her preparation for a restricted identity in motherhood; and Trites (1991) castigates Disney's version of *The Little Mermaid* for its negation of "values that affirm femininity . . . [and] rob women of integrity" (p. 145). Furthermore, other critics note that "isolated" (Addison, 1995) and "voiceless" (Sells, 1995) Disney heroines typically exist in a world in which fathers are the sole proprietors of parenthood, mothers are conspicuous by their absence, and Disney villains are caricatures of evil temptresses or wicked stepmothers.<sup>1</sup>

These recurrent patterns in critical responses suggest that Disney animated film ventures retain the same conditions of patriarchal oppression permeating the original folktales. However, aside from the fact that Disney renditions are interpretive revisions rather than faithful chronicles of traditional tales,<sup>2</sup> categorically dismissing them as subversive of females or the feminine<sup>3</sup> is problematic for two reasons. The first relates to the *filmic presentation* of the fairy tale; the second to the *popular reception* of Disney films.

First, Disney animated films diverge appreciably from their predecessors in *presentational form*. Traditional fairy tales, articulated through the discursive, linguistic medium, comprise a "conventional language system" grounded in a patriarchal reality that "gives voice largely to men" (Foss, 1988, pp. 10-11), "marginalizes" women (Kaplan, 1983, p. 3), and operates generically to preserve "neatly ordered patriarchal realms" (Zipes, 1995, p. 40; see also Zipes, 1983). In contrast, Disney tales are constructed through the intricate union of discursivity and nondiscursivity—the latter comprised principally of animated and musical configurations that account for much of the films' critical and popular appeal.<sup>4</sup> Nondiscursivity, as Foss (1988) notes, potentially

functions as a communicative mode accommodating a more feminine system of meanings. Indeed, according to Langer (1953), nondiscursive representations are capable of articulating "knowledge that cannot be rendered discursively because [they] concern experiences that are not *formally* amenable to the discursive projection" (pp. 240-241). The interplay of forms indigenous to Disney animated films, then, heightens the prospect that such works are polysemous or open to multiple interpretations—including one more affirming of females and/or feminine principles than traditional fairy tales invite. Moreover, polysemous texts possess the potential to construct a *female glance* (Foss & Foss, 1994), a spectator position enabling mass-mediated discourses to be experienced as both pleasurable and empowering for women.

Second, unlike traditional folktales which target a readership of children, Disney tales are earmarked as family entertainment intended for the ambiguous but ubiquitous American "family" audience (Natale, 1991). This shift in targeted audience presents a mixed bag of possible gender messages. In one respect, reaching such an audience requires textual strategies which ostensibly retain the magic that delights children and also add dimensions of sex, romance, and conflict that appeal to adults (Marin, 1991; see also Downey *et al.*, 1996). Thus, Disney's fairy tales must provide sufficiently safe, clean, and wholesome advice and appropriate models of behavior to mollify parents while entertaining both child and adult members of the audience. To accomplish this, Rollin (1987) argues, Disney fairy tales ideologically saturate their audiences with "archetypal myths, . . . symbols, . . . [and] values" derived from a distinctly American cultural context (p. 93). Because that context historically is rooted in patriarchy, Disney tales can be interpreted as reaffirming the social status quo.

Yet, such a conclusion fails to acknowledge the pervasive tension and evolving cultural perceptions associated with gender that mark our contemporary sociopolitical existence. Additionally, this view gives short shrift to the Disney audience who certainly has made virtually every Disney animated fairy tale in the past decade a runaway blockbuster (in particular *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Lion King*, *Pocahontas*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*). However, if one grants that mass audiences *do* "reify Disney's . . . ingenious ability to keep a finger on the pulse of America" (Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995, pp. 4-5) but simultaneously *are not* necessarily culturally "Dopey" or duped by such a message producer or its messages,

then perhaps audience members can read these films in negotiated or oppositional ways. That is, audience members may read Disney's animated tales in gender affirming ways not likely possible with traditional discursive fairy tales.

In this essay I take a liberal feminist position<sup>1</sup> to argue that Disney animated films' blending of discursive and nondiscursive forms enables viewers to construct meanings of the films that empower the feminine. Specifically, through their construction and sequencing, I claim that Disney films create a female spectatorship position which opens such texts to multiple interpretations and gives rise to potentially pleasurable viewing experiences for women. To illustrate this, I examine the Disney film *Beauty and the Beast* (hereafter *BB*). My justification for choosing this film is three-fold: it features a central female character, allegedly making the tale *her* story; it emphasizes humans rather than animals as do works like *Bambi* or *The Rescuers Down Under*; and it originates from a classical fairy tale interpreted as unfavorably representing women (Warner, 1992). After addressing the conceptual nature and role of polysemy and feminine spectatorship in popular culture discourses, this essay then examines how *BB*'s discursive and nondiscursive structures enact empowerment and pleasure for women viewers.

### Constructing the Female Glance

Whether a film like Disney's *BB* functions as feminine empowerment depends upon the degree to which it can generate an "openness" to resistant readings by diverse message recipients. While traditional critical media studies have been preoccupied with delineating how discourses inflict a dominant ideology on viewers or readers, one contemporary strain of research shifts focus to the audience's decoding of and control over the meanings of mass media artifacts (Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1987; 1986, Radway, 1984). Audiences, argues Fiske (1987, p. 65), possess the "ability to make their own socially pertinent meanings out of the semiotic resources" of popular mass mediated texts because such texts manifest *polysemy*. Polysemy refers to the degree to which a text creates free space to interpret its messages in multiple ways.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, the polysemic character of a text implicated in dominant racial, class, or gender ideologies may be examined through various means. For example, scholars have highlighted the *contradic-*

tions embedded in texts (Fiske, 1986), *hegemonic structures* underlying television discourses (Cloud, 1992; Dow, 1990), and *configurality* in film (Rasmussen & Downey, 1989). Another way, however, and one centered in the interdependent relationship of message and audience, is the notion of a *female spectator position* created through what Foss and Foss (1994) term the "female glance." "Spectatorship" refers to the "preferred viewpoint from which to view the world of [a] text" (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 410). As many scholars note, conventional representations in film privilege a masculine position or "male gaze" for the viewer, one which reaffirms patriarchy and reproduces women's social disempowerment through displaying females as passive "objects" to be looked at rather than active "subjects" who do the looking (Kuhn, 1985; Kaplan, 1983). This male gaze is symptomatic of larger rhetorical patterns of patriarchal autonomy, hierarchy, and control embedded in Western discursive practices (see Schaefer, 1985; Kuhn, 1972).

Consequently, Foss and Foss (1994) argue that constructing a "feminine vantage point" or "female glance" requires "structuring into the text . . . activities, experiences, and qualities more likely to characterize women's than men's lives" (p. 411). A text that invites a female glance, they observe, is one which substantively, stylistically, and structurally incorporates "a repertoire of culturally constructed characteristics likely to be possessed by and/or ascribed to women under present cultural and political arrangements" (p. 411). Such characteristics potentially frame a feminist epistemology and a feminine relation to language. A feminine language system would envision communicative processes as relational rather than autonomous, and would reject hierarchical power in favor of reciprocal power. Donovan (1985, pp. 172-173) argues that women's discourse typically is marked by a subjective, emotional, and private reality which stems from dailiness and concrete experience in which meaning not only is interdependent, contextual, and cooperative, but entails the functional end of meeting needs of self and others. A feminine discourse, then, can be a configural, holistic, and nonlinear expression which inductively generates permeable, diffuse, multiplicities of meaning, and one which ontologically affirms *reciprocity* in power relations. Emphasizing power parity arising from mutual accountability, such a feminine style of communication tends to be governed by an epistemology ethically "based in caring and personal responsibility as guides for the process of generating knowledge" (Rasmussen, 1994, p. 3).

Furthermore, Foss and Foss (1994) contend that a female glance—whether its presence dominates a text's structure or competes with a preferred male gaze—achieves the effect of “foster[ing] an openness to multiple interpretations” (p. 423). Disney's *BB* develops a female glance in two overlapping ways: (1) the discursive and nondiscursive elements of the film *ambiguously* reflect qualities associated with both masculine and feminine domains, thus opening the film for dominant and resistant audience readings simultaneously; and (2) the movement of the narrative melds discursive and nondiscursive elements in a *configural* presentation that creates gendered conflict from the co-existence of female and male spectatorship, thus making feminine empowerment possible.

*BB* weaves language and narrative form with music and animation to tell its story. Discursively, this tale mirrors the autonomous and hierarchical flavor of male-centered language, for unlike most animated works—particularly cartoons—that are long on the delights of visual imagery and short on talk (Leskosky, 1989, p. 60), Disney's films prominently feature language forms, perhaps because script, storyline, and dialogue are written first, while musical and animated components are then overlaid on this framework (Thomas, 1991, pp. 124-135). Linear, logical, and largely self-sufficient, the resulting narratives seem capable of generating meaning independent of other filmic elements.

In the original fairy tale, *BB*'s substantive storyline placed female concerns at the forefront. Its theme addressed the plight of a young woman who learns to value internal being over external appearance. Consequently, the work emphasized the reformation of a main character and enacted a transition from childhood to adulthood by “present[ing] a . . . problem of conflict that the character must overcome” in order to grow up (Berland, 1982, p. 101). In contrast, Disney's rendition centers conflict within a male character—the Beast “is the guy with the problem” (Anson, 1991, p. 80)—and substitutes a daughter's voluntary sacrifice to save her father for a father's bartering of his daughter. Disney's version narratively subordinates females' experiences to those of males and eventually moves to a denouement that resolves a male's inner turmoil.

However, Disney's rendition of *BB* is not entirely a masculinized narrative. Although the story is presented from a male's perspective, it also enunciates the experiences of Belle, without whom the

tale could not be told. The core of the film, then, consists not of a single static discourse that positions a female character at its edges, but rather of a moral and relational entanglement that progressively escalates and increasingly invites Belle's active intervention. The film revels in dialogue, but the linguistic dynamics of interaction create cooperation within the context of conflict, interdependence from seemingly autonomous beings, and reciprocity between female and male. Moreover, Belle's actions—not her beauty—drive the film's tension, inform other characters' behaviors, and resolve conflict. As a result, the film's discursive form generates a female-centeredness within the unfolding masculine narrative.

Intricately woven into the Disney narrative are animation and music. These nondiscursive forms share qualities commonly associated with masculine and feminine principles at the same time. On the one hand, like all film, animation privileges vision, thus raising the specter of the male gaze (Foss & Foss, 1994). The production techniques that give animation its distinctive storytelling qualities include still and moving photography, computer simulation, and the manipulation of the camera; according to Kaplan (1983), these serve to augment a male gaze. Furthermore, because animation depends upon the power of symbolism, its meanings derive not only from the discursive logic of the narrative but additionally from the larger cultural system. Hence, the animated fairy tale symbolically reproduces a "pre-existent [patriarchal] reality" (Rabinovitz, 1991, p. 105). Similarly, while music, as a mode of communication, constitutes a language of its own, Disney musical selections feature lyrics designed to carry the story along.

On the other hand, animated and musical forms seem particularly well suited to articulating feminine experiences. Because of its very nature, animation stretches the boundaries of conventional sensibilities. An imaginative, abstract artform, animation refers to "the art of movements that are drawn"; it is an expression built "upon an aesthetics of artifice" that transcends the limits of discursive form. Animation's images are "distinctively nonrealistic, [their] movement of presumably inanimate objects seems to violate physical law, and many animated pieces exhibit metamorphosis, [or] a change in an object's apparent form" (Small & Levinson, 1989, pp. 67-68, 69). As Barol (1989) observes, "a good animated cartoon can transport [one] to a universe where earthbound rules don't ap-



ply and any physical whimsy is possible" (p. 72). In other words, the world created by animation is a whole new world potentially unconstrained by any conventional system, patriarchy or otherwise. Likewise, music's discursive and nondiscursive elements, its nonlinear, holistic, emotional output, evoke private, personal, diffuse meanings. The "realm of sounds and rhythms . . . [is] rich in meanings and pleasures" (Flinn, 1986, pp. 57, 61) and almost unlimited in its capacity to elicit feelings and privilege senses other than vision.

Importantly, however, both animation and music derive their meaning largely within the context of the whole fairy tale, for a coherent story demands interconnection among all filmic elements. These nondiscursive elements, then, provide continuity and unity to narrative, cementing disparate forms together in an interdependent relationship. Yet, such forms do not merely aid narrative understanding but also furnish their own distinct meaning because of their ability to command visual and aural attention. Small and Levinson (1989) argue that this is possible because animation tends to "return audience attention to the very construction of the artwork itself" (p. 70). Hence, animation comprises far more than the process of "investing inanimate things" or anthropomorphizing objects; because it turns to itself, it "delights the eye," exposes hidden themes and messages, and enables the audience "to see things anew" (Rollin, 1987, p. 92). Similarly, Disney's Oscar-winning musical scores play "an integral part of [a tale's] fantasy milieu" (Leskosky, 1989, p. 57), developing dramas akin to "operettas" (Ansen, 1991, p. 74).

Together, these discursive and nondiscursive elements contribute to the development of a "female glance" because they articulate female as well as male experiences. This *ambiguity*—not genderlessness—that renders the text peculiarly vulnerable to appropriation by different viewers cooperates with a *configural* presentation generating tension and enabling "the comparison and contrast of whole life systems with one another" (Rasmussen & Downey, 1989, p. 82). I argue that this ambiguity and configurality create a gendered conflict juxtaposing male and female experiences. The resulting tension facilitates feminine empowerment by producing a paradoxical dilemma out of which emerges an altered perspective on gender and power. The following section examines the nature and implications of this process in Disney's *BB*.

## Forming Feminine Empowerment

*BB* juxtaposes interdependent but competing male and female stories: the narrative follows the trials and tribulations of a central male character whose problems can be corrected only through a woman's help; a woman's emergent needs can be satisfied only through a man's internal transformation. Three sequences illuminate the gender dynamics of the film's competing narratives.

### *The Forms of Resistance*

The first sequence establishes conflict by creating tension between a narrative framed by masculine domination, and animated, musical configurations presenting feminine resistance. The latter puncture the narrative, highlighting the flaws and inadequacies of this male-centered system.

*His Story.* *BB* begins from a masculine perspective, implying that this is a male's tale with a conventional story of men fighting for possession of a woman. However, the ground of its conflict is a problem a male faces as a result of his transgressions. The opening of *BB* generates the aura of a classical fairy tale with voice-over narration accompanying still paintings that depict the fate of a selfish, mean-spirited prince. When he twice refuses shelter to an old woman, she transforms herself into an Enchantress and casts a spell on the prince and his castle. She converts him into a Beast whose redemption depends upon developing his capacity to love and accept others, feats that can be accomplished only by earning a woman's unconditional love. Soon thereafter, viewers are introduced to Gaston. By his own admission, he is the town's strongest, most handsome, most admired man; he is also a self-centered egomaniac who unilaterally has decided that Belle—the village's most beautiful woman and, hence, deserving of him—will be his wife. Belle's refusal to surrender to his charms constitutes his problem.

The story appears to privilege masculine *control* by developing the *autonomy* and *hierarchy* common to a male perspective. The abrogation of responsibility by two males represents the autonomous nature of this power and males' capacity to define and limit meaning. Although the film's exigency stems from males' predicaments, responsibility for those dilemmas are attributed to a female. For example, a female sorcerer casts a spell over the Beast; only another female can

reverse the spell. These events prime the Beast to blame and later manipulate a woman for his own selfish needs. Concomitantly, Gaston finds Belle's rejection of his marriage proposal inexplicable, and defines her response as a challenge. This leads him to insist absolutely that he will "have Belle for my wife, make no mistake about that," and to intimate that she is but a trifling obstacle to his carefully crafted plans. Narratively, *BB* blames females for males' problems and depicts males as ill-fated casualties of feminine wiles.

Yet, despite depicting females simultaneously as source of and solution to problems, the film locates control within the masculine realm through its two central male characters: a prince-turned-beast who, despite his ghastly appearance, controls his castle and intimidates his servants, all of whom acquiesce to his orders; and a self-important Gaston whose power follows from his physical strength, his expertise as the town's premiere hunter, and his sensuality as facile women swoon at the mere mention of his name. This power is realized as males variously endeavor to inflict their will upon Belle, in effect overpowering and defining her essence. Because males possess legitimate power by virtue of their positions in the context of the fairy tale, Belle's unwillingness to conform to expectations marks her as peculiar and flawed, portrayals which result in her regulation and alienation. Belle is denounced by villagers partly because of her association with her eccentric inventor father but largely because of her preoccupation with reading. She lives in the fantasy world of books. While her books allow her the vicarious experience of romance and adventure, nevertheless, Belle's obsession with them violates social norms. This condition disturbs Belle because she feels she neither "fits in" nor has anyone with whom she can talk. Journeying to the village's bookstore and shunned by townsfolk along the way, she encounters Gaston. He derides her interest in reading: "Belle, it's about time you got your head out of those books and paid attention to more important things, like me. The whole town's talking about it. It's not right for a woman to read. Soon she starts getting ideas, and thinking. . . ." Although Gaston's attitude is subverted later in the film, Belle's unconventionality at this point emerges as more threatening to him than idiosyncratic to her; hence, Gaston is compelled to render it ineffectual, to dominate her.

Taming Belle, however, is not easy. When words don't work, Gaston resorts to more aggressive measures to curb her independent spirit. For example, when she spurns his advances—and later his shallow

marriage proposal—with an adroitness Gaston is too dense to fathom, he ruins her book, first throwing it in the mud and later disrespectfully propping his feet upon it. His relentless pursuit is unsuccessful but it achieves the effect of negating any comfort she finds in reading.

Still, Belle's submission is not yet complete. This symbolic disconfirmation of identity (ruining her book) is followed by the more direct physical punishment of silencing her. Learning of her father's imprisonment by the Beast, Belle travels to the Beast's castle where she offers to trade places with her father to secure his freedom. Her promise to remain forever at the castle requires forfeiture of her books and her father, twin symbols of affirmation, freedom, and intellect. This sacrifice silences Belle. Such muting is a standard device for punishing women in traditional fairy tales. As Bottigheimer (1986) notes, "the deprivation of speech provides an effective means of breaking [her] will, . . . [a symbol] which completes the equation of speech with power" (p. 116). The Beast's manipulation of Belle, then, works to his advantage and to her detriment.

In *BB*, then, men's needs dominate; additionally, their narrative centrality creates a limited and limiting portrait of Belle. Although she desires freedom, intellectual recognition, and relational fulfillment, her subordinate status requires that she prove her worthiness by acting as the antidote for their problems. However, animation and music undercut this narrative meaning by weaving in a potent and different story.

*Her Story.* Music and animation collaborate to offer a portrait of a strong, relationally-connected woman acting to secure self-validation and her own freedom. Two themes dominate Belle's tale: one is an affirmation of her nature and desires; the second is a subversion of oppressive narrative representations of her. First, Belle's desires and discontentments emerge principally through music. *BB*'s first song introduces her fear that she will be condemned to live within a "provincial world." The catchy song of the same name captures the apprehension that her ambitions are unobtainable in her restricted environment. This tune is philosophical, dreamy, and inspirational; it blends light rhythmic continuity with a progressive emotional intensity that moves from somber to enthusiastic and, at its crescendo, determined. In it, Belle's voice competes with those of intrusive townspeople who refer to her as strange, distracted, and "nothing like the rest of us."

The busy, frenetic, fast-paced selection incorporates multiple perspectives; however, Belle's voice dominates. Her voice is the force that unifies the disparate images, dialogue, and visions offered in this scene. She speaks of the dreariness and sameness of village life, observing that "there must be more than this provincial life." Enlivened during a short melodic interlude that differs from the rest of the selection, she wishes for adventure and romance. The song concludes on a grand, eloquent note as Belle overlooks a majestic valley from her position high on a hillside. Resolute in her conviction not to marry Gaston, Belle intones: "I want adventure in the great wide somewhere; I want it more than I can tell. And for once it might be grand to have someone understand; I want so much more than they've got planned." Clearly, she aches for something beyond romance and marriage, something inaccessible to her in this present world.

Music is the filmic outlet for Belle's frustrated spirit, and animated images augment this theme. Belle speaks first through song as she exits her country cottage and heads into town. Although her house stands relationally disconnected from the village, it merges simply, quietly, and confidently with the earthy setting; its elegance and strength, like that of Belle, imply an attachment to nature. Light surrounding the house is diffuse, shimmery, private but welcoming; it contrasts sharply with the stuffy, unyielding aura pervading the surrounding village. Later, as Belle sings of her longings, she finds comfort with the birds, sheep, and barnyard animals who flock spontaneously to her. Furthermore, when Belle dominates the screen, the filmic backdrop takes on heightened energy and grandeur, and her song's finale is accompanied by camera work that pans the noble countryside, intimating reciprocal affirmation of both. Her animated world is alive, electric, and hopeful; its colors sparkle with detail. However, this world is insufficient for within it she remains isolated; outside of its boundaries, she remains restricted.

Second, the musical and animated elements framing Belle's story provide a satiric interpretation of male attributes. Most obvious is the animated exaggeration of all things male. Men's physiques are looming and disproportionate: both the Beast and Gaston possess mammoth heads, necks, and burly chests; and their immense hands dwarf what comes within their grasp. Gaston, replete with sparkling teeth and chin chiseled to gross perfection, is a quintessential caricature of machismo.<sup>7</sup> However, the net effect of the

animation's visual magnification is humorous, clownish, and ultimately ironic, inviting viewers not to take such pretensions seriously or as indicative of masculinity.

Equally ironic are the animated and musical depictions of the efforts of villagers and Gaston to push Belle into conforming to traditional female roles of domestic servitude. For example, she first enters the village singing a song; however, townspeople and later Gaston seem to take that song over, shifting lyrical content to their own impressions of her. Their rhyming synchrony intimates ritual and order; their words are paternalistic and admonishing, a negation of her feelings. Visually, however, Belle shortcircuits these intrusions. She reads while walking, oblivious to the activities around her. While carts move furiously but respectfully out of her way and gossip abounds within ear-shot, Belle simply disregards both. She does not miss a word while instinctively pushing a jug of water out of her way when its descent threatens to harm her. Her book—this symbol of her autonomy, uniqueness, and vigor—is ever more compelling. The villagers fail to impress her, and Gaston is equally incapable of invading her intellectual territory. He attempts to control her song, crooning to her of romantic needs and conquest in a voice both boisterous and demanding. Yet, though he persists, he fails to penetrate; impotent, his exaggerated displays of power are no match for her inner strengths.

The film's opening musical medley, coupled with its visual images, uncovers Belle's essence, strengths, and need for freedom. Collectively these attributes confound and alter the overt narrative's meaning. Indeed, Belle's story undermines narrative representations of masculine autonomy and control in several ways. It reveals male power as *illusory*. Belle's intellect and intuition defeat Gaston at every turn. Later, because the Beast rules a castle in which he is a virtual prisoner, his power and autonomy emerge as *delusory*. Like Gaston, the Beast *needs* Belle to resolve his problems, and this shatters any pretensions of masculine independence. It is this linking of female with male stories in a relationship of interdependence that disrupts the hold of the male gaze over the fairy tale, thus opening space for a female glance to occupy. Moreover, the film's depiction of Belle's independence, intelligence, and interests intimate that she possesses intrinsic qualities which will enable her to overturn the inappropriate but powerful social forces striving to silence her. Such a portrait adds visibility and influence to that glance.

The film's early scenes, then, meld two stories. Males' flaws strip them of power while Belle's limited, oppressive world fuels her struggle. She needs emancipation, they need fixing; and neither can succeed without the other. This mutual dependence sets the stage for the escalation of the fairy tale's conflict.

### *The Forms of Empowerment*

The middle section of *BB* features the gradual formation of a relationship between Belle and the Beast. Discursively, while the narrative again promotes the veracity of the story of masculine dominance and control, music and animation continue to provide a counter narrative of feminine power. The ensuing confrontation between gender realms forces recognition of the futility of patriarchal dichotomies, and culminates in the development of a model of shared autonomy and mutual empowerment evidenced by the Beast's transformation and Belle's legitimation.

*His Voice.* In the film's second section, action occurs in a different setting, the Beast's castle. Confined and frightened, Belle's curiosity nevertheless leads her to violate the Beast's restrictions and explore the castle. In one of its forbidden rooms, she discovers the Beast's lair, a sanctuary dark and in complete disrepair save for a glowing, wilting rose at its center. (This rose symbolizes time for when the last petal falls the Beast is doomed forever to remain in his grotesque form.) Mesmerized by the mystical flower, and moving closer to touch it, Belle is confronted by the Beast who rages at her encroachment. She flees the castle despite her vow to stay. Cornered by a pack of wolves during her escape, she is saved by the Beast who is seriously injured in the process. Concerned and feeling guilty, Belle takes the Beast home to the castle and nurses him back to health. This fragile beginning forms the foundation for a friendship that flourishes. The film revels in scenes of the Beast's socialization. Belle instructs him in reading, table manners, and communing with nature and animals; in turn, the Beast is kind and attentive to Belle, consummating his gratitude by literally giving her the castle's immense library, one which holds more books than Belle could ever read. Soon, in love and with his dormant feelings revived, the Beast learns altruism. Eventually he comes to share Belle's ethic of caring. Importantly, as Belle had done earlier for

her father, the Beast sacrifices his own needs (i.e., freedom from his beastly body) to set Belle free to return home to care for her ill father.

Initially, castle life seems as oppressive as the conditions Belle experienced in the village. At the beginning of this section, the narrative retains a distinctly autonomous, hierarchically masculine flavor in two ways. First, once Belle enters into his world, *he* dictates the rules: the Beast orders Belle to join him for dinner; he restricts her movements to selected rooms in the castle; he restrains his servants from attending to her, saying "If she doesn't eat with me, she doesn't eat at all." When he later saves her life, the event smacks of indebtedness. Significantly, after Belle's initial imprisonment, the scene shifts abruptly to Gaston. Commiserating at the village's saloon over Belle's rejection, he continues to plot his imminent marriage to her, first by refusing to help her father rescue Belle and later by scheming to incarcerate her father. This structural alignment of Gaston and the Beast—the film moves easily from one character to the other at this point—implies no qualitative difference between the two males.

Second, the film becomes even more of a male-focused story through visual images. For example, Belle's clothing changes from modest country dress to more sensual, elegant, and low-cut ball gown. The parallels between her evolving attitude toward the Beast and images increasingly ripe with sexual and sexist implications confirm the male gaze Gaston had earlier displayed. As in many male narratives, men here are conspicuously obsessed by a woman's appearance: Gaston's outrageous actions stem from Belle's beauty; the castle's animated objects view Belle as the woman who will "break the spell" because of her attractiveness; and the Beast's depression deepens as he compares her physical beauty to his hideousness, intoning, "she'll never see me as anything but a monster." These discursive and nondiscursive narrative elements affirm the male gaze and the patriarchal attitude that a female's value resides in her physical appearance. However, by having the Beast experience and acknowledge the discomfort of being the object of a critical, controlling gaze, the film also disrupts and ambiguates the traditional cinematic male gaze and invites viewers to experience what it feels like to be the object of such scrutiny.

Both discursively and nondiscursively, the middle section of the narrative highlights males' exploitation of Belle and Belle's apparent submission. Validating this subjugation is her continued imprisonment,



directly by the Beast and indirectly by Gaston via his threats to institutionalize her father. Once again, however, Belle's own evolving story undermines the dominant narrative force through music and animation.

*Her Voice.* Belle soon discovers that this castle is no ordinary world. Replete with interactive objects, it is magical and unpredictable, containing only fragments of her former existence. Her curiosity piqued, she explores her new environment, apprehensive but not fearful; indeed, she seems to rejoice in this opportunity for adventure. Although imprisoned, she still roams the castle, intimating that neither rules nor roles in this environment are immutable. Her subsequent actions facilitate the recognition by both male and female characters of the pleasure and benefits of a life script based in *relational connections* and *reciprocal power*.

The film's animation uncovers the power of interconnections marked by interdependence and mutual affirmation. Belle exits her claustrophobic room in search of food. What she finds instead is a circle of support comprised of the castle's remarkable animated objects: Cogsworth, an ornery mantle clock; Mrs. Potts, a sympathetic grandmotherly teapot; and Lumiere, a sophisticated, well-mannered candlestick. A bond between Belle and these delightful characters is forged immediately for they identify with her repressed existence. Though unspoken, they offer her friendship; in turn, Belle provides them with the strength and incentive to undertake joint goals of emancipation.

As a result, these supporting characters assume special importance in the film both symbolically and narratively. At one level, they embody divergent facets of feminine experience: while Mrs. Potts represents comforting matriarchy and a sustenance grounded in internal worth, Cogsworth personifies reluctant but socialized conformity and submission to patriarchy. A feisty figure with a relational focus, Lumiere acts as the group's mediator and instigator of actions that illuminate the possibility of rebirth and change.

At the narrative level, these objects who are supposed to aid Belle's transition into castle life work on her behalf, overturning the masculinized, coercive power of the Beast. Their roles shift from servants to advisors: they instruct the Beast about being a "gentleman," on the importance of treating Belle with gentleness, sincerity, and compliments, and on controlling his temper. Motherly Mrs. Potts directs her attention to more romantic advice: she cautions him that love takes

time, and that he must assume responsibility for helping Belle to see past his appearance to his soul. They continue to fuss over him throughout this segment, facilitating his transformation both physically and temperamentally. During this section, lighting supports the shifting narrative, replacing the dark, somber ambiance of the castle with scenes filled with brightness and enchantment, reflective of vitality and hopefulness.

This section's musical selections reiterate Belle's story as they intensify the contrast with the discursively dominant narrative. The first musical excerpt, however, differs significantly from the three others that follow. Entitled "Gaston," it occurs during Gaston's sulking sojourn at the village tavern. Humiliated by Belle's rejection, Gaston receives much needed bolstering from his sidekick LeFou and other taverners as they join in a raucous, action-packed tribute to their "favorite guy." Resembling a polka with its brash, repetitive tones of brass and accordian to accompany its high pitch and volume, Gaston's song is a satiric, exaggerated, and initially good-natured commentary on traditional manly power. Beer-guzzling vocalists rattle off an inventive lyrical list of Gaston's admirable "manly" qualities: he is slick, quick, possessing the thickest neck; he is burly, brawny, with biceps to spare; he is covered with hair; he expectorates like no other; and he uses antlers in all of his decorating. These innocuous qualities soon take on a biting edge, highlighting Gaston's more threatening drawbacks: he also "plots," "takes cheap shots," and "persecutes harmless crackpots" like no other. The song's move from rollicky to ominous parallels Gaston's degeneration from caricature to creep. The transformation that occurs during this musical interlude is important because it justifies the need for an alternative to the potentially damaging consequences of such a depiction of masculine power.

That alternative, of course, draws from attributes associated with the feminine, and consists of shared, united power produced by strong relational ties. Three musical pieces chronicle the emergence of this perspective on gender and power. The film's seminal tune occurs during Belle's first night at the castle when hunger leads her to the kitchen. There she is treated to "Be Our Guest," a dinner show extravaganza performed by kitchen staff and all of the castle's animated furnishings. This fully orchestrated rendition, featuring choreographed dancing in perfect synchrony with melody, merges multiple voices, rhythms, and actions in harmonious celebration. Visual depictions of food prep-

aration underscore the theme of nourishment and the metaphor of choice. As Lumiere notes, dinner naturally requires music and Belle deserves both because she has won her "own free pass to be our guest." The film turns on this "showstopping" song because it communicates Belle's inclusion. No longer isolated or disenfranchised, her perspective is valued at last for she is linked with and celebrated by others.

This song initiates a shift in power relations that reverberates immediately in the narrative. Belle begins to counter the Beast's outbursts with retorts of her own. When he blames her for his injuries, for example, she responds by locating responsibility for her decision to leave the castle on his temper. The stalemate resulting from this parrying is liberating because, by forcing recognition of each other's culpability and merits, it culminates in mutual affirmation and respect. Dramatizing their partnership is the ballad "Something There that Wasn't There Before." Against a background of the easy rhythms of soft, lilting violins, its tentative bursts of notes symbolize the uncertainties of this new way of relating until the soaring musical bridge signals sudden abandonment of doubt in a flight of fantasy and hope. The lyrics speak of the couple coming together on their own, of their mutual acceptance and validation as the "something new" intimated in the song. This new model of power is illustrated by the Beast's singing *with* Belle for the only time in the film, and by the refrain which returns to the melody heard in the film's first song. Both valorize Belle and musically affirm a shift in the narrative from the preeminence of *his* story to *her* and *her* story.

This song is followed almost immediately with a rendition of the ballad "Beauty and the Beast." Dressed elegantly for a dinner date, Belle and the Beast descend the staircase together to its opening strains. The tune is soft, romantic, mysterious, and tender as its grand violins and piano accompany the couple's waltz. As the lyrics indicate, their tale, "as old as time," chronicles the unpredictable but inevitable personal and relational satisfaction that comes from cooperation and mutuality when "one bends unexpectedly," when one "changes." Surrounded by magnificent, magical scenery, the song has a quiet certainty in its confirmation of his transformation, her legitimacy, and their powerful unity. Visually, their united descent down the staircase and their synchronous dance signify the film's displacement of the male gaze by the female glance, the latter which subjects neither Belle nor the Beast to an objectified gaze. The film here interrupts the tradi-

tional masculine spectator position and makes both characters simultaneously the object and subject of each other's views.

The interplay among the film's discursive and nondiscursive elements continues to redefine narrative meaning. The Beast's successful transformation into a "person" and lover stems directly from internalizing interdependence, reciprocity, and relational sensitivity. His humanization—his embracing of these feminine values—affords him a genuine understanding of Belle and the pain of her subjugation, whereupon he sets her free. The dynamics of his conversion also lead to the recovery of Belle's voice. The Beast offers Belle a gift signifying his acceptance and validation of her: the castle library. The library restores her previously muted voice. This segment that features the growing parity and reciprocal affirmation of female and male stories also signifies a movement in which the female glance gains both stature and ground. In one sense, the film shifts focus from gazing upon Belle to the Beast's discomfort at being the object of scrutiny, thus positioning female spectatorship on par with the conventional male gaze. In another sense, the film legitimizes principles associated with the feminine not simply through the Beast's support of Belle, or even through his active assimilation of feminine attributes, but also by featuring Belle's actions as effectual and transformative, thus enhancing the appeal of these qualities. In essence, whereas the film's first section disrupted the male gaze, the middle of the film establishes the female glance as a viable alternative to the male gaze. Yet, the original narrative's conflict—males' problems—remains. That tension is resolved in the fairy tale's final sequence.

### *The Paradox of Power*

While the first sequence's feminine resistance undermined masculine narrative dominance, the second sequence established the female story as both challenging and formidable. The film's denouement unifies the conflicting narratives through an ideological blending of facets of the feminine and masculine in both female and male protagonists. Belle's renunciation of Gaston coupled with the Beast's triumph over this figure reinforces the destructiveness of traditional patriarchal models of power and affirms the construction of a more feminine model of power grounded in reciprocal caring and the acceptance of responsibility.

*His Power.* Action moves swiftly in the third segment. After Belle returns home, she encounters Gaston who immediately places her in an uncompromising position: marry him or her father is off to the asylum for his crazy rantings about an alleged beast. Belle counters his threat, not only by using the Beast's magical mirror to prove his existence, but also by denouncing Gaston as the real "beast." Infuriated, Gaston jails Belle and her father in their cellar and sets out with his cronies to storm the castle and destroy this monster. Meanwhile, the Beast, dispirited by Belle's departure, apparently awaits his destiny at the castle. Ironically, having discovered acceptance and love, but lacking the means to actualize them, he has no will to live. Consequently, when Gaston attacks, the Beast all but capitulates until he sees Belle, who has returned to the castle after escaping her confinement. A rejuvenated Beast engages Gaston in a predictable battle high atop the castle towers. After easily subduing Gaston, who by now is reduced to a sniveling wretch, the Beast humanely spares his life. However, when the Beast turns his attention to Belle, Gaston uses the distraction to inflict a fatal blow on the Beast. At the same time, Gaston slips and tumbles from the tower to his death, the victim of his own foibles. As the Beast lays dying and the rose's last petal begins to fall, Belle declares her love for him. Suddenly, a magical conversion ensues as the Beast metamorphoses back into human form. The film ends with the restoration of the castle—once Belle's prison but now her haven—to shimmery greatness and the couple's marital celebration that promises a life of shared love and friendship.

In many ways, the narrative's final section is overtly patriarchal. Most of the segment's actions involve Gaston's rage alone or the Beast's confrontation with his nemesis. Gaston's exercise of raw physical strength, born of a violent rage caused by his loss of Belle to the Beast, leads him to ridicule the Beast vindictively: "What's the matter, Beast? Too kind and gentle to fight back?" Thereafter, he defines their showdown as a traditional masculine fighting ritual over ownership of a woman. He shouts maniacally, "Did you honestly think she'd want you when she had someone like me? It's over, Beast. Belle is mine!" Belle's absence during this battle—partly because of her imprisonment and partly because of her passivity once she returns to the castle—lends credence to this enactment of masculine domination. Yet, the film's resolution

of conflict is neither so simple nor conventional. Potent nondiscursive elements challenge the surface narrative, ultimately creating a holistic union of forms that imparts one coherent message.

*Her Power.* During the final segment, visual imagery juxtaposes menacing masculine from inviting feminine worlds. Gaston's threats, as well as his and villagers' siege of the castle, occur in a context infused with darkness, chaos, and foreboding. Their assault takes place during a thunderstorm that obscures visibility and therefore intimates fear and danger. This outside atmosphere contrasts dramatically with that inside the castle, which is bright and lively as its inhabitants prepare to stave off imminent invasion. After the castle creatures successfully defend their home, the animated setting highlights magical images that soar and twinkle, coinciding with the castle's emancipation and its proprietors' romantic fulfillment.

Musical accompaniment reinforces this distinction between the exterior patriarchal world of Gaston and the villagers and the castle's interior "world" of mutuality and cooperation. Gaston's song, "Kill the Beast," evokes a fearful portrait of a foaming monster who feasts on children. Lyrically aggressive and intimidating, with a disjunctive, dissonant, almost nonmelodic tune, crashing cymbals, and thundering drums, this selection, reminiscent of pre-battle cavalry calls-to-arms, incites a mob sentiment. Its overstated words and intonations, however, uncover Gaston's facade and generate sympathy for the Beast.

Confirmation of the impotence of Gaston's controlling perspective occurs during the entertaining brawl that takes place at the castle between provincial, superstitious, masculinized peasants and aristocratic, supernatural, feminized household furnishings. The latter's cleverness conquers brute strength, and their solidarity triumphs over contentiousness as a cartoonish version of "Be Our Guest" provides a comical commentary. The film ends with a jubilant rendition of "Beauty and the Beast," signifying relational fulfillment and mutual emancipation from needs made possible through the twin mechanisms of mutual concern and cooperative power sharing.

As events unfold in the work's final section, Belle's role is largely that of an observer. Such a role—seemingly supportive of a male gaze—is appropriate, however, within the evolving context of the film. The Beast's conflict with Gaston represents a struggle over rival masculine ways of being; as a result, resolving that problem is *their* responsibility, *not* hers. Hence, because the Beast has changed his attitude

and renounced the impulse to dominate and oppress, his victory over Gaston is guaranteed. This understanding stems from the joint presence of male gaze and female glance which merge in the fairy tale's finale to establish a collaborative spectator position enabling subject and object to look at one another in mutual affirmation.

### Conclusions and Implications

This Disney fairy tale's predictably pleasing ending affirms the abiding strengths of love and romance, and human passions for freedom and acceptance. *BB*'s symbolic finale, however, reflects a paradoxical solution to the dilemma indigenous to power and gender relations. The Beast has learned that he must give up power to have power; Belle has learned that her emergent power was a valuable resource she possessed all along. But, whereas Belle's personal value remained socially unempowered, the Beast's social validity masked much needed repair of personal flaws and weaknesses. The Beast's surrendering of pretensions toward masculine control *is* what empowers him to attain personal redemption and relationship fulfillment. Belle's inherent qualities *are* simultaneously the foundation for and validation of resistance and empowerment. Both, then, paradoxically have intrinsic power contingent upon bestowal from the other. In addition, this authentication of the individual is the necessary condition for rewarding romantic relationships. Thus, mutual empowerment stemming from the legitimation of personhood generates relational interdependence that can resolve gendered tension.

This essay argues that the significance of *BB* stems from its capacity to create a female spectatorship position that encourages an empowering interpretation by viewers. As the analysis indicates, *BB* expresses two potent gendered voices. Their unfolding stories enact a struggle between masculine and feminine conceptions of power. To resolve conflict, the film articulates an alternative conception of power, power as a paradoxically autonomous and mutually contingent entity that is part of the ongoing, productive, and creative processes of being human. Such a view grounds the claim that male power without a potent female counterpart is both absurd and impossible because the intrinsic *relational* nature of power makes one's existence dependent on the other. That power is relational—that it is an interdependent construct, that it is manifest in numerous ways, and that who has pow-

er is not necessarily who is in control but also who decides who is in control (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995)—offers a challenge to the grounding of patriarchy by intimating that its power orientation is fundamentally flawed and in need of reconceptualization. Thus, *BB* calls into question the nature of patriarchal power itself.

Conceptually, this analysis offers an alternative reading of Disney's *BB*, one made possible by the interplay of discursive and nondiscursive forms which invites viewers to construct a feminine spectatorship position providing pleasurable viewing and an affirmation for women and men. The film accomplishes its construction of a female glance and an openness to interpretation developmentally, first by disrupting and challenging the male gaze, and then by uniting both male and female spectator positions through a common message that stresses shared cooperation and reciprocal validation between female and male. It is this enactment and resolution of conflict that comprises *BB*'s narrative movement, and that creates space for a female glance along with the potential to empower women.

While texts often are open to multiple readings (i.e., are polysemous), engaging in oppositional or negotiated interpretations is hard work (Condit, 1989), and Disney's animated films clearly tend to "essentialize" men and women (see Griffin, 1996). Indeed, among the most troubling aspects of *BB* are its overreliance on symbolism depicting idealized images of femininity and masculinity (for example, the beauty of females and the physical strength of males), and its foregrounding of the masculine narrative. Moreover, the appeal of a preferred reading is encoded in the story's progression toward a selected end: romantic fulfillment, and happiness forever after between a woman and a man. In this sense, the impulse to evaluate *BB* at least as an occasionally *ambivalent* text that functions hegemonically to support the patriarchal social order is tempting. Cloud (1992) argues that ambivalence operates hegemonically in mass-mediated works because when difference (racial or sexual) is maintained but assimilation is mandated, a double bind from which one cannot escape is created. As a result, the powerful, dominant (white or patriarchal) social order is perpetuated.

But *BB*'s text, while seemingly a closed masculine narrative, offers a feminine discourse as well. Although *BB* maintains gender difference and simultaneously moves toward assimilation (in this case, relational interdependence), the film also implicates the dominant or-



der—males, the masculine, and patriarchy—as the culprit or agent responsible for conflict, and makes “his” change a necessary precursor to narrative and ideological closure. If anything, then, *BB* represents a reverse ambivalence, replacing a potential double binding paradox with a gendered *dialectic* enabling the transcendence of conflict as long as males shape up and subsequent relational interdependence between female and male is maintained. This movement is made possible through textual polysemy generated by the incorporation of a female glance.

Three social implications arise from this analysis. First, the film presents characters driven for intimate relationship fulfillment; hence, *BB* reinforces belief in heterosexual romantic idealism. Such idealism can be limiting because it embraces the view that a woman's identity derives from her relationship with a man—i.e., she is defined through him. Once she catches him, her goals are realized (Hubbard, 1985). However, while *BB* glorifies romance, it also challenges this prescription for actualization and selfhood in two ways: it features women and men equally motivated by relationship goals; and it places a woman's needs for independence and validation ahead of any relationship needs.

Second, *BB* grants power and value to females and males even as it implies that females' legitimacy has not been recognized.<sup>8</sup> For males to realize their culpability and need to change, females' voices must be heard. Belle accomplishes this feat because the mechanisms for her emancipation already exist, even in this masculine-framed narrative. On the one hand, the patriarchal world she inhabits produces her discontent; on the other hand, this same world gives rise to the Beast's transformation which, in turn, reinforces the view that patriarchy does yield. Change, therefore, is possible.

Third, the key rhetorical move in *BB* is its development of a paradox through which a gendered dialectic emerges. Paradoxes can be especially persuasive in conflicts, according to Chesebro (1984), because they enable participants to expand behavioral options and create new ways of perceiving phenomena. *BB*'s paradoxical perspective on power provides one way to view and possibly transcend recurrent cultural dilemmas related to gender empowerment and disempowerment.

*BB*'s popularity is testimony to the effectiveness of the Disneyesque fairy tale formula. Originating perhaps with *Peter Pan*, and fully developed in *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, *Lion King*, *Pocahontas*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Disney blockbusters present a recur-

rent narrative pattern of gender conflict in which worthy but misdirected boys, fathers, or potential husbands must undergo a transformation to earn the love and respect of a female. This transformation leads to a transcendent resolution only when the male surrenders control, accepts a female's inalienable right to freedom, and validates her independent identity. Such a pattern apparently resonates with Disney's target audience, the American family, fitting within its cultural system of beliefs by incorporating familiar patriarchal archetypes along with emergent and transitional prototypes. This analysis of *BB* suggests that one key to the popularity of the fairy tale formula may be its articulation of dual gender voices and the subsequent development of the interdependence intrinsic to a dialectical perspective of power.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The presence of the father and absence of the mother in fairy tales is not coincidental. According to Kestenbaum (1983), fathers assimilate daughters into a patriarchal system through developing their "identification and superego formation" (p. 119), while Donovan (1985) notes that motherhood is potentially subversive of patriarchy. Moreover, many of the memorable female characters from Disney animated feature films are paradigms of evil: Ursula the Sea Witch in *The Little Mermaid*, Malificent in *Sleeping Beauty*, and Cruella de Vil in *101 Dalmations*.

<sup>2</sup>Although critics agree that Disney fairy tales differ significantly from the original tales, they are divided about whether such changes make the stories more or less disconfirming of women. For instance, Trites (1991) clearly takes Disney to task for damaging portraits of women; Crafton's (1989) essay on *Peter Pan* is far less critical. For more ambiguous readings of the gendering of Disney animated features, see Ingwersen and Ingwersen (1991) and Jeffords (1995).

<sup>3</sup>"Female" and "male" describe biological sex distinctions while "feminine" and "masculine" depict gender orientations. The differences between these two categorical sets are well documented in feminist literature. But, because of the way gender and sex are manifested in the forthcoming analysis of *Beauty and the Beast*, this essay associates "female" with "feminine" and "male" with "masculine." Any deviations from this usage are noted in the text itself.

<sup>4</sup>Critics almost unilaterally locate the appeal of Disney's films in animation and musical configurations rather than linguistic, narrative structures. For example, Corliss (1991) notes that the animation in *Beauty and the Beast* is "close to seamless. Its animators' pens are wands; their movement enchants . . . with a resonance rare in movies" (p. 96). Oscar-winning songwriters Alan Menken and Howard Ashman "have turned 'Beauty and the Beast' into a resplendent musical. Sophisticated and funny, romantic and scary, [its] witty, memorable songs . . . put current Broadway fare to shame" (Ansen, 1991, p. 74). Representative of collective critical admiration for the technical achievements of Disney, Gabler (1990) writes about *The Little Mermaid*: "[H]ere is animation that restores a sense of awe. . . . Here are characterizations . . . that can take their place beside Jiminy Cricket and Thumper. And here is an Oscar-winning score . . . that is simply exquisite. The score comes complete with a showstopper, 'Under the Sea,' that is so brilliantly coordinated with the animation you want to stand up and applaud when it's over" (p. 61).

<sup>5</sup>According to Steeves (1987), a liberal feminist position assumes that women's unequal treatment can be rectified through existing social structures and that such "inequity is simply a matter of irrational prejudice that can be solved through rational argument" (p. 100). Moreover, typical media studies from this perspective tend to highlight the presence, absence, stereotyping, and devaluation of women for the larger purpose of facilitating women's social value and parity. In examining Disney animated films, I adopt this position principally because my orientation is to look at the rhetorical *functioning* of texts that are at once hugely popular and vulnerable to sharp criticism in feminist circles. This essay develops the argument that the audience's endorsement of Disney fairy tales probably relates not only to its sanctioning of heterosexual romance, but also to its perception that women are indeed accorded value in the films.

<sup>6</sup>Some scholars have challenged the notion of polysemy. For example, Condit (1989) argues that *polysemy* is a textual phenomenon while *polyvalence* is a relevant dimension of audiences. In other words, texts are polysemic to the degree that they are "capable of bearing multiple meanings because of the varying intertextual relationships they carry" (p. 104), while polyvalence is reserved for audiences' differential evaluations of a text. The distinction here is related to the origin of multiplicity—i.e., whether it is principally a characteristic of a text or a set of predispositions in an audience. In a later work, Cloud (1992) adds the term *ambivalence*, arguing that mass-mediated texts about racial (and by extension gender) difference are less open to multiple interpretations (polysemy) or divergent assessments (polyvalence) than they are oppositional and binary representations that function hegemonically to reproduce "otherness" in racial identity. Regardless of the term used, however, the idea of more than one possible interpretation of a popular culture artifact is rooted in the message-audience relationship.

<sup>7</sup>Erb (1995) notes that visions of the male body reflect both feminist and homoerotic undercurrents.

<sup>8</sup>A qualification is in order here. Like most fairy tales, and virtually all of Disney's animated features, the heroine is the only viable female in her universe. Hence, she tends to remain isolated from a support system composed of women.

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